

Making Room for the Thomases

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; John 20:19-31

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Acts 2:14a, 22-32

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them:

"You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him,

'I saw the Lord always before me,

*for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;*

moreover, my flesh will live in hope.

For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,

or let your Holy One experience corruption.

You have made known to me the ways of life;

you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

"Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

'He was not abandoned to Hades,

nor did his flesh experience corruption.'

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses."

John 20:19-31 (The Message)

19-20 *Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then he showed them his hands and side.*

20-21 *The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were exuberant. Jesus repeated his greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you."*

22-23 *Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said. "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"*

24-25 *But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master."*

But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

26 *Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you."*

27 *Then he focused his attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe."*

28 *Thomas said, "My Master! My God!"*

29 *Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing."*

30-31 *Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.*



(Sung)

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.*

Here we are, in the season of Easter. Our lessons from scripture, both the lesson from Acts (written by Luke the Evangelist) and the lesson from John's Gospel, are set within the context of Spirit. In Acts, Peter is preaching on the day of Pentecost – a Jewish festival, actually called Shavuot. This was a holy day when Jews would come from all places to worship God and celebrate both the giving of the Law, the Torah, as well as the end of the spring harvest. In John, the disciples, huddled in the locked upper room, are visited by the Risen Christ who greets them with words of peace and breaths upon them the breath of God.

(Sung)

*Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew.
That I may love the way you love and do what you would do.*

This is a faith family story – our faith family. A distant faith relative of ours – Thomas – was absent from the faith family gathering when Jesus appeared in the locked room for the first time. There is no explanation for his absence. It could have been he was overcome with grief that Jesus was not with them. It could have been he was having second thoughts about this Jesus Movement. But, whatever the reason for his absence, the fact that he was not there gives the Gospel writer the opportunity to describing what it is like to have questions about God, what it is like to have doubts about our lives and the things we are taught and the stories we are told.

Thomas was not there on the first visit, but he was there on the second. He did show up. We might even say, he returned. Further, we are told that he returned with authenticity. In other words, he was honest. He heard about the visit of Christ to the disciples and he questioned it. He wanted proof. He wanted “hands on” experience. If he were an American, he would be from Missouri, the Show Me State.

Thomas gets a reputation in the family, doesn't he? Forever after this experience, he will be known as “doubting” Thomas. In some circles, this is seen as a negative term. That message goes like this: Thomas did not have enough faith, or enough trust, in his faith family, to believe them when they said that Jesus was alive and had come to them the previous week. In other circles, Thomas is real, and, more like us than we are ready to admit.

Two weeks ago, at the workshop on our church purpose statement, we were moving toward our final language and we got caught up on the word “Christian.” What does it mean? Does your definition of Christian mean the same as mine? What am I signing on to when I say that I am a Christian? We were having a Thomas-like conversation. In the midst of this discussion, we were invited by our leader, Mike Denton, to breathe in and breathe out, breathe in and breathe out.

(Sung)

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Marcus Borg, in his book, ***The Heart of Christianity***, talks about four primary meanings of faith, one of which he calls a “matter of the head” and the others “matters of the heart.” The first he names is faith as “assent.” This is faith as agreement to a set of principals and belief statements. In this definition of faith, a person is called upon to decide whether certain belief statements are true. What complicates this is the reality of science and modern thinking. What was considered “true” in the time of Jesus and the early church is different from our understandings of today. Many folks are compelled to say that they need “faith” in order to believe what they know cannot be true. My favorite saying around this, especially with regard to Biblical literalism, is: *The Bible is true and some of it actually happened.*

A second meaning of faith is referred to as “trust.” In Borg’s words, “it does not mean trusting in the truth of a set of statements about God . . . it means trusting *in* God.” (My emphasis) This is the meaning of faith that is described in the term, “leap of faith.” To use an image by Kierkegaard, faith is like floating in seventy thousand fathoms of water. Another image is that of being in a burning building with smoke all around and standing at an window hearing your father calling your name from outside beyond the smoke, out of sight but not out of hearing, and telling you to jump into his arms and that he will catch you and that you will be safe. This is the faith John’s Gospel describes when Jesus says, “My sheep know my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27)

A third meaning of faith is fidelity or faithfulness. This is loving-devotion and loyalty. Again, it is not about faithfulness to statements about God, but, in the words of Borg, “Rather, it means faithfulness to the God to whom the Bible and creeds and doctrines point. This meaning of faith is similar to marriage and commitment ceremonies. Whether publicly or privately, we give our pledge, our oath, our promise to God – not to statements about God, but to God – that we will be true and loyal and committed. The record of scripture points out that God’s people have strayed from this path, this faith relationship, more times than we want to mention, yet the message is always there that God calls us back, and always with love and forgiveness.

(Sung)

*Come back to me with all your heart,
Don't let fear keep us apart.
Trees do bend, tho' straight and tall;
So must we to others' call.*

*LONG HAVE I WAITED FOR YOUR COMING
HOME TO ME AND LIVING DEEPLY OUR NEW LIFE.*

A fourth meaning of faith Borg describes as “a way of seeing” God. This is the faith that the Bible describes when Jesus heals the people who are blind. We are invited to open our eyes and see life as good and full of hope, not despair or sorrow, or death. This is more than Pollyanna language, more than the half-full way of seeing life. This is a view of life that allows us, in Borg’s language, “to see ‘what is’ with wonder and beauty, even if sometimes a terrible beauty . . . this is seeing reality as gracious.”

(Sung)

*Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.*

Refrain

*Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready my God, Thy will to see,
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!*

Thomas experienced Christ in the upper room and believed. This we are told and this we tell. One tradition about Thomas is that he traveled as far as India and China, telling others the family story, about Jesus and his love.

We are called to faith, made for faith, sent in faith. We need to make room for the Thomases, make room in our hearts and in our church for those who question and who hunger for the abundant life God offers to all. The promise we have been given, to those of us who have not seen the way that Thomas saw – which is all of us – is that we will be blessed, and, I would add, be a blessing to others.

Amen.